

Autism Awareness Training for First Responders



We have all seen news reports or viewed body cam video of officers trying to detain or arrest individuals who have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). When things go bad the incident is often followed by the finger pointing of 20/20 hindsight. You may even have found yourself saying, “boy that doesn’t look good” or “what was that officer thinking?” On the other hand, we know of officers coming to the rescue of children with ASD who were lost, having an emotional meltdown, or difficulty dealing with a world that is frightening. What makes the difference between the negative and positive outcomes?

In the cases that go bad officers may not realize they are dealing with individuals who have ASD. They confused the individual’s “odd behavior” with drug abuse, intoxication, or deceptive criminal behavior. Chances are that had these officers been trained to recognize ASD behaviors the outcome would have been dramatically different with a positive ending.

One in 54 children is diagnosed with ASD in the United States. Utah has the second-highest population of individuals with ASD. There are approximately 15,000 children and 8,000 adults who are on the spectrum in Utah. There is much speculation why, but the research is inconclusive. In other words, we do not know why there is such a high number of individuals in Utah who have ASD.

In response to the need to train law enforcement officers to recognize ASD behaviors the Utah Attorney General's VirTra Training Center is offering Autism Awareness Training for First Responders. The program was developed by VirTra™ in collaboration with the South West Autism Resource and Research Center, the Autism Council of Utah, and the Utah Attorney General's Autism Advisory Board.

Utah's Governor and legislature have also responded to the need for more police training for this special population. Governor Cox signed H.B. 162 Peace Officer Training Amendments and H.B. 334 Special Needs Training for Law Enforcement. These bills require Peace Officers Standards and Training (POST) to include 16 hours of training on ASD and other mental illnesses during an agency's yearly 40-hour in-service training requirement. These bills specifically outlines that officers and deputies have training in intervention responses to ASD and other mental health issues.

The training provided by the Attorney General's Training Center will qualify for some of the new legislative requirements. The program includes a multimedia presentation, interactive virtual reality scenarios, classroom instruction, review of officer body cam video, and in person discussions with leaders and volunteers representing Utah's Autism community. The objectives for the program are to aid officers to identify ASD behaviors and provide tools for a positive interaction. The training is not designed to teach officers how to diagnose individuals with ASD. The training is delivered at no-cost to agencies and qualifies for International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards and Training (IADLEST) certification.

Ken Wallentine, Chief of Police for West Jordan Police Department said this about his department's training experience at the Attorney General's training center:

"In the summer of 2020, the West Jordan Police Department partnered with the Utah Attorney General training center to deliver a unique new multidisciplinary training experience, created in conjunction with VirTra and the Autism Council of Utah. Every West Jordan PD School Resource Officer and DARE Officer completed the training in August 2020, before the new school year began.

The training experience, combining virtual reality scenarios in the VirTra 300® with small group discussions with officers and community members with live autism experiences, was overwhelmingly successful. Acting on the encouragement of the first officers, the autism training experience was incorporated into the West Jordan PD quarterly in-service training for all officers.

We're astonished at the positive comments from our officers. They feel much better prepared to handle calls for service involving persons with autism and to practice empathy in an effective way. We're grateful for the partnership with the Attorney General training center and VirTra, along with members of the Utah Council on Autism in facilitating this vital training experience."

Calleen Kenney, President of the Autism Counsel of Utah had this to say about her experience working with police officers:

“As a volunteer, I have really enjoyed helping members of our law enforcement and first responder communities learn more about the autism community! I am so impressed with their willingness to share experiences and ask questions. As a caregiver, knowing that my family will be a little more supported in times of crises is invaluable. I really think this training will save and change lives. I truly appreciate all the departments, teams and individuals that are involved and participating in this training. I believe that every officer going into the field needs to understand how high the possibilities are that they will encounter an individual with autism and to be more prepared to appropriately handle and support the situation.”

You can schedule Autism Awareness Training for First Responders for members of your department by contacting Scott Carver at 385-867-9887 / scottcarver@agutah.gov or Will Fowlke at 801-608-5356 / wfowlke@agutah.gov. Be safe and be prepared for the unexpected.

By:

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